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The Reason of Democracy
A Preliminary Note on Political Consent

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In September 1945, a public debate pertaining on how to relate democracy to history in a given national setting opposed the newly appointed Italian prime minister, Ferruccio Parri and the elderly philosopher Benedetto Croce[1]. The former had just set before the post-fascist Consultative Assembly the unprecedented task of promoting "the cause of democracy", as he considered that Italians may have once lived under a nominal liberal regime, but had never before experienced a democratic form of government. Class oppression, a selfish liberal oligarchy, threatening territorial and social disequilibria, economic backwardness, a reactionary and imperialistic dominant culture have been preconditions of fascism rather than kernels of democracy, if we are to understand the latter, insisted Parri, as a "political technique" of ruling equal citizens. In opposition, Croce rejoined that the history of liberal Italy should be construed as a long and productive process of ascension to democracy. Over many decades, ordinary Italians improved their health and literacy level, established trade unions, left wing parties and labor associations to defend their rights; they all gradually enjoyed better life standards, could move up in society through the benefits of liberal education and participate in a civil and enlightened public space from where violence was often excluded in favor of free speech.

This dispute was not incidental or relevant only to a particular moment and place. Germans faced a similar key question, differently raised though, at about the same time, as will Spaniards, Portuguese and Greeks do three decades later, or Central and Eastern Europeans in 1989 and 1990, and again in 2004/2007 on the verge of their European integration. Analytically, the problem of democratic transformations in Europe, captured in an exemplary manner and in a decisive juncture by the dialogue between Ferruccio Parri and Benedetto Croce, could be rephrased as such: is democracy a normative intellectual expectation of political equality respectful of the individual freedoms never technically fulfilled in history, or just the diverse and cumulative historical experiences of the expansion of civil, political and social rights in the Western world, conveniently described under a unifying name?

These lines grow out of a specific theoretical assumption: the way we study democracy's historical shapes and forms usually abides by the observation – ingrained in most European political cultures – that democracy, even if there is no possible agreement and there are a few misunderstandings on its nature and meaning, is either a concept that still awaits for a complete embodiment or an accidental, and largely unintended progression of personal freedoms and collective liberties. In the first case, the matter has been mainly explored by social and political theorists

[1] Giuseppe BEDESCHI, *La fabbrica delle ideologie. Il pensiero politico nell'Italia del Novecento*, Editori Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2002, pp. 306-308.

who, from Hannah Arendt to John Dunn[1], are constantly disturbed by the fact that the democratic regimes did not succeed in making morally acceptable the indignity of being ruled[2]. However, historians and social scientists may point out that, despite the endurance of the distinction between the rulers and the ruled beyond the demise of capacity-based, authoritarian or totalitarian regimes, it is precisely democracy as a incremental historical experience that rendered this pervasive divide not only apparent, but also subject to political and moral criticism[3].

Hence, it seems sensible to presume that being ruled in a democratic regime should be considered in theory and could be easily proven empirically to be, at any rate thus far, a political condition superior to any other. If that is the case, a distinctive conceptual device will possibly congregate both political theorists and political scientists striving to make sense of democracy on their own disciplinary account, even if they would illustrate it with different arrays of arguments and diverge on its very function and content. Indeed, the apparent ascendancy of democracy might be not only encapsulated, but also explained by the notion of *consent*, somewhat superseded in the mainstream recent literature on the theory of democracy[4]. Yet, following in the footsteps of John Locke, consent – be it implicit, explicit, or manufactured – is intellectually the most acceptable substitute of natural freedom and a plausible foundational of the political community[5], at least if the political is to be related with the individual will.

From a theoretical perspective, substantiated by the normative assumptions of the liberal tradition of political thought, people tend to recognize as legitimate the rule of the democratic elites since they trust they are being governed as autonomous, consenting and critical citizens and not as reified, submissive and silent subjects. They are even prepared to admit the fairness of inequality with respect to the political decisions given that they tend to acknowledge as natural the imbalance of their positions on the market (provided the market is free) or the disproportion of their engagements in the spheres of civil society, learning and religion. From a more procedural standpoint (that Parri had seemingly in mind), people implicitly assent to be ruled by professional politicians because they voted in their rulers themselves in fair and free elections, and they have the assurance that they can vote them out should they be dissatisfied with the outcome. Moreover, they measure their acquiescence by standardized indicators of material and post-material satisfaction.

According to the first position, generic, philosophically constructed, reasonable individuals, willingly bound to each other in a free polity, are deemed capable to calculate their choices, interests and opportunities in a manifold social environment of which governmental politics is just one particular realm, from

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[1] John DUNN, *Setting the People Free. A Story of Democracy*, Atlantic Books, London, 2005.

[2] Hannah ARENDT, *On Revolution*, Viking, New York, 1965, p. 240.

[3] E.g. Luciano CANFORA, *La democrazia. Storia di una ideologia*, Editori Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2004.

[4] However, but not surprisingly, in such an overview as the one authored by Ian SHAPIRO, *The State of Democratic Theory*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2003, the term "consent" is not listed in the index.

[5] John LOCKE, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. by Peter Laslett, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988, p. 349: "Whereas he, that has once, by actual Agreement, and any express Declaration, given his Consent to be of any Commonwealth, is perpetually and indispensably to be and remain unalterably a Subject to it, and can never be again in the liberty of the state of Nature" (II, 121).

which they may securely decide to disaffect themselves at any time and at their own convenience in order to fulfill their aspirations in a different public sphere. In the second stance, people would act merely as an electoral body, politically crafted by an exterior and constitutive will, and cannot take any decision unless someone else decides in advance who the people are in constitutional terms[1] and, above all, when they are to become a legal people of enfranchised voters entitled to turn out in order to return their rulers.

In a historian's eyes, one matter looms here larger than any other: time. Read as a normative expectation of individual empowerment, democracy is a timeless story. It resides in the continuous present of political theory, interested more in human nature than in human history. When taken as a procedural collective enfranchisement, democracy seems to have a history of successive achievements and failures. This history could be and actually was reviewed as a narrative of elections[2], as well as an unfolding story of contention[3] that fomented and convoyed the course of democratization and electoral enfranchisement in Western Europe. The purpose of a prospective inquiry into the nature of political consent would not be that much to find who exactly of Croce and Parri has provided a more accurate account of the historicity of democracy, but rather to probe the extent to which their controversy and the opinions they held may have had and perhaps might still have any bearing on the comprehension of democracy as a space of shared political experience (*Erfahrungsraum*), to use the wording of Reinhart Koselleck[4], that most European societies of today would consider not only past but yet to come.

Giovanni Sartori famously wrote that democracy does not mean that the people are always right but that the people have the right to be mistaken[5]. To use a scholastic phrasing, the freedom to err by democratic ignorance is not only acceptable but even constitutive on condition that ignorance may be assailable (St Thomas Aquinas explained that someone may confound accidents as long as he is conversant with the substantial rules under which accidents will possibly occur). Unassailable ignorance intervenes when conventions remain unknown even after all reasonable efforts were made in conscience by the interested party in order to determine them[6]. My hypothesis is that unassailable ignorance as to how consent may be substantiated in a particular span of historical experience is to be equally observed, from 1945 to 1989, under state socialism and in liberal democracies.

In 2004/2007, the institutional association of self-aware Western liberal democracies, based on implicit consent determined by trust and/or satisfaction, with the former communist popular democracies, relying on an explicit and ideologically manufactured consent, into an enlarged European Union closed a 20th century

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[1] The dictum inspiring this line belongs to Sir Ivor Jennings, quoted by Olivier BEAUD, *La puissance de l'État*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1994, p. 293.

[2] Stefano BARTOLINI, Peter MAIR, *Identity, Competition, and Electoral Availability. The Stabilisation of European Electorates 1885-1985*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990.

[3] Charles TILLY, Douglas McADAM, Sidney FARROW, *Contention and Democracy in Europe, 1650-2000*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003.

[4] Reinhart KOSELLECK, *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1979.

[5] Giovanni SARTORI, "How Far Can Free Government Travel?", *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 6, no. 3, 1995, p. 109.

[6] Daniel BARBU, "De l'ignorance invincible dans la démocratie. Réflexions sur la transformation post-communiste", *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review*, vol. I, no. 1, 2001, p. 19.

that many scholars have already cast away on the rubbish heap of the Berlin wall. The demise of state socialism both as a political ideology and a political regime, not only have rendered possible an unparalleled experiment in building a virtually homogeneous democratic order in Europe, but have opened up a most extraordinary intellectual opportunity: to grasp in the same conceptual framework what Feruccio Parri and Benedetto Croce agreed that was neither understandable together nor comparable on grounds of a unified theory, *i.e.* totalitarianism and constitutional democracies.

However, the credit for making such a theoretical headway is not to be given to groundbreaking minds akin to Croce or Parri, but to their decision-making and expert publics: assemblies, governments, and the academia at large. Indeed, in the wake of the communist extinction, West European leaders, experts and social scientists – who during the Cold War used to qualify the Soviet system as the exact opposite of constitutional democracy based on the protection of human rights and free and fair elections – thought that their past experience of ideological competition and political confrontation was immaterial for the present transformation of democracy envisaged, again in Koselleck's language, rather as a range of institutional and discursive expectations (*Erwartungshorizon*). It was therefore assumed in 1993 at Copenhagen that Western liberal democracies and ex-communist states were not all too different in political nature, an outlook already drafted by the theorists of convergence and sustainable development during the détente years of the Cold War.

Ferruccio Parri was probably as correct as the European heads of states and governments deciding the enlargement to the East when equating the very reason of democracy to an unhistorical technique marshaled from above, to a political device of extracting consent from society under the promise of promoting such social goods as welfare or human rights. How and why did improbable democratic voluntary or traditional organizations (according to a standard liberal appraisal) like the British workers' movement[1] or the Catholic Church in Italy[2] or Germany[3] encouraged among their rank-and-file the growth of a political attachment to a representative democracy alien to their own original values? How and why, behind the iron curtain, did for example individual farmers manage to have a stake in the performance of a popular democracy that had dispossessed them of their property[4]?

In order to answer these questions, one should look at the ways and means through which particular societies abided by, if not consented to the political techniques establishing the differentiation between the rulers and the ruled, one must eventually collect, categorize, uncover when necessary and capitalize on serial evidence of those expressions of political consent – be them sectional, local, partisan or partial – engendered in an autonomous manner by national societies. A proper examination of the nature of consent ought to revisit but not narrate the entwined logic of assent and dissent, contention and participation, must take advantage of but not reinvent the diagram of cast ballots and electoral turn outs or the expansion

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[1] Marc STEARS, *Progressives, Pluralists, and the Problems of the State. Ideologies of Reform in the United States and Britain, 1909-1926*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, pp. 203-230.

[2] E.g. Francesco TRANIELLO, *Città del'uomo. Cattolici, partito e Stato nella storia d'Italia*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1990.

[3] E.g. Rudolf UERTZ, *Christentum und Sozialismus in der frühen CDU. Grundlagen und Wirkungen der christlich-sozialen Ideen in der Union 1945-1949*, Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, Stuttgart, 1981.

[4] Daniel BARBU, "The Burden of Politics. Public Space, Political Participation, and State Socialism", *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review*, vol. II, no. 2, 2002, pp. 329-346.

and disaffection of constituencies. The query would rather be focused on those forms of consent which were not proposed or imposed by the nation-states and the political and bureaucratic personnel that embodied them with the intention of establishing and increasing their legitimacy.

My assumption is that the language of political consent was, and still is idiomatic, dialectal and rarely submitted to a universally accepted rule and that the nation-state may not be, as Pierre Manent has argued[1], the only imaginable incarnation of democratic expectations. Benedetto Croce, for his part, maintained that in Italy (but his example could easily be replicated), while governments building and embodying the nation were not democratic, society itself was among the most democratic in Europe. For him, democracy as a public free encounter of divergent visions of truth (*gara civile*) is ineluctably liberal: democracy is the fabric and incentive of liberalism, whereas liberalism is the framework and the method of democracy[2].

To sum up, the surmise underlining this introductory note is that an examination of the forms taken by political consent, apprehended as the reason of democracy, may grant the benefit of historical depth to the transformations the corporeality of democracy, that is European nation-states, both Western and Eastern, had to cope with in the period between the junctures of 1945 and 1989, but also before and beyond. Unlike the reason of state, justified by a clear – though often concealed – end deployed in time and limited in scope, the reason of democracy is affected by unassailable ignorance and therefore evades the temporal and spatial determinations wielded by Croce and Parri in their paradigmatic controversy. Regarded as an autonomous and discriminating response given by ordinary citizens to the different appeals of democracy (electoral, liberal, constitutional, popular, pluralist, populist), consent might be a research object that is worth being imagined, contrived and probed.

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[1] Pierre MANENT, *La raison des nations. Réflexions sur la démocratie en Europe*, Gallimard, Paris, 2006.

[2] "Democrazia senza dubbio liberale, come ogni verace democrazia, perché se il liberalismo senza democrazia langue privo di materia e di stimolo, la democrazia a sua volta, senza l'osservanza del sistema e del metodo liberale, si perverte e si corrompe e apre la via alla ditattura e ai despotismi", quoted by Giuseppe BEDESCHI, *La fabbrica delle ideologie*...cit., p. 307.